DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 308 373 CE 052 796

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TITLE Critical Theory and Adult Education: A Representative Literature Review.
PUB DATE 89
NOTE 21p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Education; *Controversial Issues (Course Content); *Critical Thinking; *Educational Philosophy; *Teacher Student Relationship; *Theory Practice Relationship

ABSTRACT

The adult capacity for critical thinking has many implications for adult education, and it is on this capacity that some writers have pinned their belief that adult education (as opposed to schooling) can be a liberating--even emancipating--experience. (Critical thinkers are able to learn through the reflection of self and one's relationship to the world.) A frequently voiced implication is that adults' education must help them determine what is good because adults can build the world they want through their control of adult experience. Critically examining experience can lead to the awareness that actions could have been, and can be, otherwise. If they are to incorporate critical thinking, adult education situations should begin with the learner's reality and cover situations, not subjects, so that learners can reflect critically on their experiences and the experiences of others. Teachers of adults should attempt to close the professional distance between themselves and learners, so that they can become less concerned with transferring knowledge to learners and more concerned with creating knowledge and understanding by tacher and learner alike. Even technical skills and knowledge can be taught within a context that encourages critical thinking. Learners do not always want to think critically, so teachers must maintain a sense of their own limitations. Teachers who assume that their ideology--even if it promotes critical thinking--is the one and only true way of viewing the world are incompetent, not liberating, educators. (The document includes a list of 18 references.) (CML)

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Critical Theory and Adult Education: A Representative Literature Review

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Many educational theorists and practitioners have acknowledged that institutionalized general education, the school, serves primarily as a cultural and social reproduction agency. Furthermore, it is hegemonic and fundamental to the mass acceptance of dominant ideology. Hegemony, as operationalized within schools, is also often claimed to be limiting on individual potentiality. Schor (1980:p.50), for instance, sees vocationalism and the subsequent ideological bifurcation of work, i.e., manual/mental, hand/head, and dirty/clean dichotomies, within schools as an example of the institutionalized restriction of human development.

Whereas schooling is often seen as oppressive and a restriction to individual human potential, adult education has been, and is often still, heralded as a means to liberate consciousness from social and structural confines. "Orthodox education may be a preparation for life but adult education is an agitating instrumentality for changing life" (Lindeman, 1926:p.165).

A dominant issue within the literature of adult education is the claimed differences in how adults and children learn and the practical implications of these differences. One common, and many claim, fundamental, theme which raises the hopes of those who believe that adult education can be liberating and also distinguishes adult learners from children is the notion of critical thinking. Being able to learn through the reflection of self and ones

relationship to the world is often claimed to be solely an adult learning capacity and a means by which education beyond schooling could emancipate humankind.

Since the inception of adult education and throughout the literature, such a notion has been expressed under many guises. This brief literature review, then, is an attempt to bring together some of the various explications of such a premise and, in particular, to examine the practical implications for adult educators and adult learners.

Deshler and Hagen (forthcoming) suggest that much of the work with regard to critical thinking is derived from critical theory as "... articulated through the sociology/philosophy of the institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, Germany beginning in the 1930's..." (p.13). The theory was developed in an attempt to understand the social construction of consciousness, and in particular, how a populace accepted many of the oppressive and inhuman aspects of their existence. Although initially conceptualized as a broad, general theory, and subsequently espoused by many, Deshler and Hagen comment further that Gramsci stated an important consequence for adult educators in expressing his belief that "... adult education was a crucial vehicle for exposing exploitation through critical reflection on the ideological legitimation of the ruling class" (p.23).

Kotinsky (1933), perhaps originally, had some idea of the rewards that could be gained from a marriage between critical theory and adult education in claiming that,

> Adults have the opportunity to build the world that they want through the control of their adult experience. Their education must somehow help them to determine what is good, and how to take hold to attain the next level (p.191).

This theme, which still makes for some valuable, uplifting reading, is still evident, albeit in various forms, within contemporary adult education literature. Heaney (1984:p.116) states that "... the goal of critical consciousness is an ethical and not a legal judgement about the social order." It is not merely determining what we mean by freedom and oppression but also **acting** from deliberation and reflection; it "... reveals previously unexplored areas of restraint and frustration .. in regard to our action upon the world." This notion that critical reflection, as an aspect of adult education, is concerned with action and behavior is also a fundamental premise of the claimed distinction between andragogy and pedagogy. The experiential "baggage" adult learners bring with them to the learning setting is seen as the focal point for many learning activities. Critically examining experience, as a basic principle of adult education, can lead to the awareness that actions could have been, and can be, otherwise.

> We need continuing education in order to learn awareness of ourselves as behaving organisms but we also need more knowledge concerning those external factors of which

> our behavior is a constant function.
> (Lindeman, 1926:74)

Much of our thoughts and actions (more than we care to admit to) are strongly influenced by the mass-media. The television and newspaper are very much instrumental in the formation of our world views and what we consider as moral, ethical, valuable, or even real. Thus, in this present decade dominated by information technology and electronic communication, Brookfield (1986) considers the skeptical examination of the products of the mass-media as an important vehicle of critical reflection in adult education settings. This deconstruction of media promoted social and individual consciousness is described as "ideological detoxification - ridding the body of poisonous and dependency-inducing substances so that individuals can live without the benefit of artificial stimuli" (p.151). Therefore, the development of critical thinking in adult learning can be encouraged "through a skepticism of the validity of television images as fully reflective of real life" (p.168). Continuing with the theme of mass communication and scrutiny of its projected images, Jarvis (1985), argues that there is an increasing need for people to distinguish between fact, interpretation of fact, and belief. While this is still an unresolved epistemological debate, he suggests that such a delineation in knowing requires "... a pluralism of modes of thought.. being capable of considering diverse interpretations of fact ... and reflecting on experience; a uniquely human

characteristic" (pp.13-14). These same themes are reiterated by Erdman (1987) in regard to teacher education; specifically, adult education teachers. "Reflection consists of examining, criticizing, reformulating and testing understandings of teaching situations..[and]... listening to, and considering, alternative possibilities, being open-minded and aware of the consequences of action" (p.18).

Whereas many of the variations in interpretation of critical theory are contextually generated, e.g., 'critical consciousness', 'reflection', 'ideological detoxification', 'perspective transformation' etc., each has to contend with the same pragmatic hurdle of practical, classroom adoption. Convincing teachers that theory can be synonymous with practice is fundamental to all valued educational theories. What do the critical theorists and proponents of critical thinking offer then as suggestions for classroom methods, techniques and activities?

In considering the practical implications of critical theory for adult education, we may need to look no further than Overstreet's (1949) suggestion that "... every situation in life offers its opportunities for mature or immature responses" (p.277). Although in much of our daily existence we may not have the time or feel inclined to reflect on our every action and/or experience, Overstreet comments that it is the mark of a mature mind to try and use everyday experience to examine personal values and beliefs and the reasons why we reject some and accept others. Although some may argue that it is fundamental to our humanity that we should practice such irregardless of whether we are in an educational setting or not, reflection on experience is seen as **the** practical implication for adult education. Adult teaching/learning situations which are to incorporate critical thinking, therefore, should begin with the learner's reality; "... the approach to adult education will be via the route of situations, not subjects .. the learning process is at the outset given a setting of reality" (Lindeman, 1926:p.9). Schor (1980:p.163), a renowned proponent of critical thinking, was at a loss in deciding on an aspect of his students' lives that he could use to initiate and guide critical awareness. In an imaginative move prior to meeting the students, he decided to take his lunch back with him to

class as a means to "... extraordinarily re-experience the ordinary." Thus, the hamburger became a departure point whereby students could reflect on aspects of daily existence and discuss issues ranging from healthy diets to the mechanics of capitalism. Brookfield (1986) describes how the television show host Donahue uses the experiences of individuals to question and reassess long held values and attitudes. On one occasion ex-members of the Communist Party of the U.S.A. discussed their experiences in front of a live audience. There were various and vociferous comments made amongst the participants yet the transcript of the show reveals that Donahue's promotion of critical thinking in this setting exemplified how adult educators can use participant experiences in the quest for an understanding of the cultural and social construction of individual mind-sets.

Pragmatically, then, adult education should try and bring the personal and structural roots of oppression into consciousness through action and reflection. But this consciousness "... cannot be the object of instruction, it must be discovered in experience - even if it only be an experience of another's experienced shared, as frequently occurs in peer group learning" (Heaney,1984:p.118). Teachers should also understand themselves, that is, develop a philosophical rationale for how they perceive and practice their roles as adult educators (Brookfield,1987). Furthermore, if critical thinking in adult education is a

process whereby educators hope to facilitate the growth of critical consciousness within learners, it would appear highly hypocritical and contradictory to not expect the same of the teachers themselves. Therefore, because this may lead to a situation where teachers are involved in the same activity as the learners, thus leading to a "blurring" in the distinction between teacher and learner, another practical implication is inferred. Teachers must attempt to close the professional distance between themselves and the learners (Shor & Freire, 1987). This can be accomplished by accepting that all parties (teachers **and** learners) bring knowledge and understanding with them to the educational setting. Each can, and must, be willing to learn from each other if the process is to work at all. The presentation of knowledge and subsequent reflection within the classroom should not be considered as a linear, uni-directional process from teacher to learner, or even vice-versa, but as a continual re-creation of knowledge in the continuing dialogue initiated by the teacher but maintained and developed by both teacher and learner alike. Thus, while institutionalized education has traditionally been more concerned with knowledge transfer than knowledge creation, it is the understanding of how knowledge is created rather than its blind acceptance which is at the heart of the practical implications of critical theory. For, "... if teachers or students exercised the power to remake knowledge

in the classroom, then they would be asserting their power to remake society" (Shor & Freire, 1987:p.10).

Even when teachers claim to have some understanding of either critical theory or critical thinking, there is still some skepticism with regard to how to promote such, where it is appropriate, and how it will effect their roles as teachers. Shor and Freire offer the following suggestions in response to such concerns. Critically, teachers should not idealize their role or task in hoping to promote critical thinking within classrooms. Hold onto the ideal by all means but be prepared to accept that some individuals, classes, or situations are just not conducive to anything other than knowledge transfer activities. Teachers should also be willing to try and learn something about the learners prior to the educational activity. They should find answers to questions such as who are the learners, why are they participating, and what is their perceived intent of the educational activity? In reiterating Jarvis, (1985) Schor & Freire continue by suggesting that teachers ought also to become comfortable with their own ignorance. The adults in each particular classroom have a vast wealth of knowledge regarding their own lives and experiences. They possess much more than the teacher could ever hope to learn from them. This self-knowledge is as valuable to each learner as the teacher's own personal knowledge or that he or she must present as part of the activity. Teachers, therefore, are encouraged to acknowledge this through the

expression of humility rather than professional authoritarianism.

If teachers are willing and able to practice these suggestions, then critical thinking and the reconstruction of consciousness can be experienced with learners rather than supposedly teaching them how to. Obviously this demands major reassessment by teachers of what their role actually is. The teacher could be either chairman, interlocutor, prolocutor, coach and strategist (Lindeman, 1926:p.189), learner while the 'enrolled learners' act as teachers (Shor & Freire:p.30), or a facilitator of the process (Brookfield, 1987:p.123), but not a facilitator of the product. In short, teachers will still have an instrumental role to play in the design and facilitation of learning experiences which encourage critical thinking. The trick, though, is that teachers must operate from within the same process, alongside the learners, in the continuing examination of their own reality and the quest for freedom of all from cultural and social oppression.

Although this all appears to be good, practical advice, three specific issues deserve particular attention if adult educators are to be encouraged to try and foster learner critical thinking. These are: how to promote critical thinking in settings where the curriculum is very clearly pre-determined, e.g., technical training; how to react to learner rejection of the process; and, even when there

appears to be some willingness to participate, what to do when there is disagreement or conflict between individual perceptions irregardless of whose they are.

Whereas training activities can be distinguished from educational ones in that each learner is expected to achieve and understand a very clearly defined set of skills and body of knowledge, for some, these activities can become a broader educational experience also. Many have tried to place the acquisition of such skills and knowledge within a context that encourages some measure of critical thinking. Brookfield (1987:p.17) states that such is at the heart of Freirean methods where **generative themes** (Freire,1972:p.69) are crucial departure points of critical awareness for adult learners. He also supports the idea that critical thinking activities are possible and practical in training settings by referring to previous studies ranging from community education to organizational development.

Yet educators, hoping to help learners acquire technical skills and knowledge and, at the same time, encourage them to become critically aware of the forces and processes which have somehow led them to see this training and its outcomes as necessary for survival almost, may see promoting critical thinking as a contradictory and very real practical dilemma. Individuals who are participants in such activities often have fairly clear expectations of what they will gain from being involved. At the same time the teacher is obliged to assist the learners gain whatever technical

expertise and resultant credentials accrue. Herein lies the practical contradiction, yet for Freire (in Schor & Friere, 1987:p.69), understanding and accepting this contradiction is inherent and fundamental to becoming more liberated through either education or training. The realization that "human action can move in several directions at once, that something can contain itself and its opposite also.." is at the heart of critical reflection on everyday experience. For example, even though teachers of motor mechanics must be competent both educationally and technically, how they go about helping people become motor mechanics can demonstrate the differences between traditional educators and liberatory ones. Both can educate and train such individuals to become competent mechanics yet the traditionalist is concerned only with the preservation of the establishment. The liberating educator, no less educationally or technically competent, though "... will try to unveil the ideology enveloped in the very expectations of the students" (p.68). For example, teachers of motor mechanics can help students understand the various systems and components of motor vehicles, while at the same time encourage them to question why the trade has developed into specialized industries such as "lube-shops", brake and exhaust specilialists, etc., and how such specialization relates to their studies and desire to become motor mechanics.

For all the claims that critical thinking can be promoted in any learning situation, whether education or training, there are still other practical problems to be overcome. In studying women's consciousness-raising groups, and, in particular, women who re-enter formal education, Mezirow (1984) comments that "... it became apparent that Freire does not give sufficient cognizance to or make explicit the stumbling blocks which intervene to make this transformation in perspective itself highly problematic" (p.126). For instance, analyzing assumptions, challenging previously accepted and internalized beliefs and values is at times uncomfortable, involves pain and can induce feelings of insecurity (Brookfield,1987).
Alternatively, it is quite possible that in fostering critical thinking adult educators may overlook that many learners may already hold somewhat of a critical consciousness. Teachers, in their zealousness, may not "... recognize that some..may simply ignore the messages designed to lull them into stupefication " (Brookfield,1986:p.153).

Learner reactions to teachers attempting to develop critical thinking, then, can take various forms. Understandably, this remains a root cause of the hesitancy or wariness teachers may feel in making such part of their own philosophical rationale. Shor's experiences give evidence of a range of learner reactions to critical thinking activities and offer some idea of how teachers should respond when their ideas and plans are rejected

(Schor & Freire, 1987). Those adult educators who have decided to utilize critical thinking within their andragogical practices should expect learner responses including joy, revelation, anger, anxiety, and apathy. Furthermore, some learners may feel an awareness of potential empowerment, yet, for whatever reason, not feel inclined to contribute to classroom dialogue. Alternatively, some may consistently return to class yet feel no sense of empowerment and merely enjoy the experience. Whatever the reaction, though, Schor suggests that teachers must try to understand and maintain a sense of their own limitations. Learner reactions to teachers promoting critical thinking will never be predictable or consistent. Success also will often be equally as elusive; it may spontaneously appear within the classroom or years afterwards in the personal lives of each or only one individual. Sadly, it may not occur at all as some are not open to such a transition from traditional concepts of education to liberatory ones, for in many instances,

> "... environmental resistances tends to tempt the organism toward conformity; why go through the bothersome toil of re-educating my habits if the present ones serve to keep me alive, well-fed, well-clothed and well-housed" (Lindeman, 1926:p.51).

Finally, in regard to the concern that some teachers may hold over what right they have to show that their world view is the result, in a sense, of some superior critical thinking and that the learners should be aspiring towards the same completely misses the point of the aim of critical

thinking within adult educational activities. The same can be said also of teachers who are worried about disagreements or differences in conclusions, answers or judgements amongst those participating in the educational activity. The aim of critical thinking is to develop critical thinking, not merely an awareness or understanding of an a priori claim regarding the effects of the social construction of reality or the cultural and social influences on individual consciousness. Teachers who practice such in the name of promoting critical thinking are no different than proselytizing ideologues. In assuming that their ideology is the one and only true way of viewing the world, and that disagreement with this world-view by learners is poor thinking, is more evidence of an incompetent, rather than liberating, educator (Brookfield,1987).

By reducing the professional distance between themselves and the learners, accepting that there is as much to be learnt from the rich and varied offerings the learners bring with them, and continually allowing their own claims, values and beliefs the same scrutiny as those of the learners, then, and, only then, will teachers have a basic idea of what critical thinking in classroom settings entails. Obviously this is not enough, though, for even if teachers, within their own consciously developed philosophical rationale, hold dear that critical thinking should underpin their activities and strive to re-create reality alongside the other adults, this still does not

guarantee any success in the quest to help liberate people from the limitations on their full potential. The adults themselves may be unreceptive to the ideas and practices educators offer in this regard. Even those who value the experiences that adult educators are trying to facilitate for them may never acknowledge that value consistently, occasionally, or ever again. This should not detract from the fundamentally moral worth and personally liberating experience of becoming more aware of who we are and why so through the process of developing consciousness in critically examining the self, the world, and our relationship to it.

For adult educators, then, who feel more comfortable with practical guidelines there is perhaps nothing more practical than the words of Habermas;

> We are never in a position to know with absolute certainty that critical enlightenment has been effective - that it has liberated us from the ideological frozen constraints of the past, and initiated genuine self-reflection. The complexity, strength and deviousness of the forms of resistance; the inadequacy of mere "intellectual understanding" to effect a radical transformation : the fact that any claim of enlightened understanding may itself be a deeper and subtler from of self-deception - these obstacles can never be completely discounted in our evaluation of the success or failure of critique (in Mezirow, 1984:p.126).

'Critical thinking', 'self-reflection', and 'perspective transformation' can all best be understood, then, as a process without a product; a means without an end. Thus, for those who participate, critical thinking is not a search for

the right and only conclusion; it is the act of searching itself which offers the most benefit. For adult educators, though, it is imperative that this process is applied as much to themselves as those who wish to participate in some educational activity with them. Although there often arises a legitimate, and sometimes necessary, traditional teacher-learner relationship when teachers and learners find themselves together, critical theory can be fundamental to this or any other style of learning activity. This is put into practice when teachers and learners together examine themselves, the world and their relationship to it, utilizing the knowledge they possess and hope to learn, in an activity which includes helping all become more critically aware of the forces and influences which bring them together.

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